

## Some Remarks on the Social Construction of Constructivism

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**> Upshot** • A dialogue among constructivist theories can be furthered by opting for a reflective point of view, by analyzing the social conditions that enhanced their legitimacy. To stimulate the discussion, this commentary briefly looks into the relationship between constructivist ideas and the social conditions in which they have developed.

« 1 » Constructivist theories have already frequently been compared with other, especially realist theories of knowledge. In recent decades, scores of studies have also compared and evaluated the merits of different constructivist theories. Often the aim has been to demonstrate either the weaknesses or the strengths of particular theories or research programs. On the contrary, papers that call for a dialogue among constructivist research programs are scarce. The target article, authored by Gastón Becerra and José Antonio Castorina, aims at a comparative analysis of four constructivist positions that are located in different disciplinary settings: the theories of Jean Piaget and Ernst von Glasersfeld (primarily situated within the field of psychology), Humberto Maturana (primarily embedded within biology) and Niklas Luhmann (sociology). This article offers an opportunity to make some additional comments about the analysis of constructivist theories.

« 2 » My aim here is not to discuss the merits of all or some of these theories. From a reflective point of view, I would rather like to take the dialogue among constructivist research programs one step further. In order to grasp some of the specificities of the different positions, it might be useful to pay special attention to the context within which these different theories originated. It should not be forgotten that the positions adopted by Piaget, von Glasersfeld, Maturana and Luhmann emerged and made sense in particular contexts. These positions were

well suited to the objectives and the socio-historical circumstances of their authors. We may therefore historicize and contextualize the concepts, methods and empirical observations that are thought to sustain the positions adopted by theorists such as Piaget, von Glasersfeld, Maturana and Luhmann. It is not necessary to convert their reasonable and intelligent historical choices into a universal touchstone for all present and future theories of knowledge. We may rather stimulate or further the dialogue among different (constructivist) research programs by understanding each of these research programs as a “product” of its particular context.

« 3 » A small parenthetical remark might be helpful. In the lexicon of the social sciences, there is a well-known term for theories or ideas that project the particular and local as the general and universal. In the tradition extending back to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, that term is, of course, “ideology.” It does not, however, seem very useful to discuss constructivist theories as ideologies in this sense of the word (as expressions of the interests of already established socio-economic or religious groups). It seems more appropriate, as Becerra and Castorina do, to speak of these theories as research programs, as expressions of particular scholarly ambitions. We may approach the work of Piaget, von Glasersfeld, Maturana and Luhmann as charters, as programs for not-yet-established, still-emerging fields of research. When Luhmann, for example, describes his own theory of social systems as a “supertheory” (Luhmann 1984: 19, 1995: 4), he describes and projects his own concepts, method, and theoretical framework as the core of the sociological enterprise as a whole, with other options assimilated into these, marginalized, or occluded outright. Luhmann’s claim has led to many, often quite dismissive reactions. But instead of reacting to the claim as such, it seems useful to inquire into Luhmann’s interest in making this claim, in putting forward his own concepts as the starting point for a new research program.

« 4 » Elsewhere I have looked at the ways Talcott Parsons legitimized his social theory (Vanderstraeten 2013, 2015). With regard to the work of Luhmann, I have discussed Luhmann’s option for commu-

nication as the basic unit of social systems in relation to the rise of the so-called “information age” or “information society” (Vanderstraeten 2012). The constructivist theory Luhmann developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s no longer builds upon features of an industrial society. It was no longer anchored in the processes of producing and trading goods or resources (commodities). His research program, which gives central significance to communication, may be perceived to reflect the way that communication networks have become more important in the emerging information or knowledge society. The legitimacy of this theoretical program is a consequence of the social transformations that the same theory tries to understand and explain. At present, it seems the best possible starting point for a constructivist theory of social systems in general and of society in particular, but it probably could not have been elaborated under different social circumstances.

« 5 » With regard to the legitimation of Luhmann’s research program, it may in addition be useful to pay attention to more specific, disciplinary interests. With much pride, Luhmann often presented his work as novel. He never got tired of criticizing and taunting contemporary sociology’s fascination for its founding fathers.

“To a great extent, those interested in theory return to the classical authors [...] The task becomes one of dissecting, criticizing, and recombining already-existing texts. What one does not trust oneself to do is assumed to be already at hand.” (Luhmann 1995: xlv)

« 6 » In his view, sociology would be better off without “reliance on illustrious names and specialization in them” (ibid: xlvi). Instead Luhmann turned to other research contexts for the development of his own research program, including cybernetics and epistemology. He looked for sociological uses of these ideas, but he also used his explorations in these other contexts to underline the novelty of his sociological program. With his turn to constructivist theories, Luhmann had the intention and ambition to elaborate a new “supertheory” on behalf of sociology. For sure, this supertheory affords an encompassing vision

of the social world. It can be credited with providing a wide range of path-breaking insights. However, his understanding and use of constructivist theories also seems to be bound to his practical situation and paradigmatic efforts. It simultaneously was a way of selling his supertheory to a broader audience. His use of a new vocabulary and a new epistemological approach was useful in underpinning his claims to originality.

« 7 » The preceding comments focus on the work of Luhmann, but similar comments might be made with regard to the research programs of Piaget, von Glasersfeld, Maturana and others, as well. Let me therefore conclude with some general observations. The nature of the relationship between ideas and the social conditions in which they develop has long been among the central concerns of fields like the sociology of knowledge, the social history of ideas, and social epistemology. Among constructivists, too, it has been debated how the form of this relationship can be properly characterized and how it should be conceptualized and studied. Not many, however, have tried to apply this point of view to the genesis and impact of constructivist theories themselves. At least in sociology, constructivist scholars have remained strangely and regrettably silent on the social conditions that have influenced (and continue to influence) the formulation of their own theories. The target article of Becerra and Castorina offers an opportunity to stimulate research in this direction. In my view, it is necessary to develop such a reflective perspective on theoretical and epistemological work itself. Research along these lines also seems to be able to further the dialogue among different constructivist research programs.

« 8 » Let me end with a request. The critical reconstruction of constructivist theories provided by Becerra and Castorina points in the first place to the heterogeneity of constructivist theories. At the same time, however, their reconstruction can be used to reflect on the social contexts that first allowed the institutionalization of dualisms, such as subject/object or knowledge/reality, and now enable us to problematize these same dualisms. While Becerra and Castorina offered an interdisciplinary reconstruction of constructivist theories, I hope that

they will be able to provide some additional reflections on the socio-historical contextualization of these theories.

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## Forms of Constructivism and Forms for Constructivism

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> **Upshot** • I discuss the strategy proposed in the target article to address constructivist epistemology by means of “dualities.” I argue that the concept of “form” is more suitable for answering constructivist questions, and I explore some consequences of this proposal.

### The problem

« 1 » According to Gastón Becerra and José Antonio Castorina, constructivism is a “movement full of tensions” (§1) and not a standardized or unified approach. Given its internal multiplicity it would be relevant to reconstruct its identity or try to distinguish at least its main constitutive differences. The strategy adopted by the authors is that of contrasting two (or three?) conceptual oppositions in four representative figures of this movement since, according to their proposal, constructivism is defined precisely by problematizing certain dualities (§6).

« 2 » These dualities are knowledge/reality and individual/society, and there is also an (ambiguous, to some extent) analysis of

the subject/object pair. The names called to testify about this are Jean Piaget, Ernst von Glasersfeld, Humberto Maturana and Niklas Luhmann. According to Becerra and Castorina, in their works there can be detected three possible positions facing each duality: overcoming, elimination or restitution (§7).

« 3 » The main goal of the authors is linking different traditions within constructivist epistemology to achieve “cross-fertilizations” among approaches (§7). Although the goal is ambitious, the target article provides only a partial solution to the goal by focusing on worn-out epistemological debates of constructivism. Thus, the analysis remains restricted to a single type of constructivism, i.e., that which is “interested in cognitive theory” and ignores the other type of constructivism distinguished by the authors, so-called “(social) constructionism” (§2) in order to avoid “an extremely large and dense argumentation” (§10).

« 4 » At the core of Becerra and Castorina’s argument is the expectation of defining constructivism by means of oppositions. However, there is no word about the reasons for this: why would this be the best way to define this movement full of tensions called constructivism? Instead of a justification, we have to expect that this duality-approach will allow us to reach relevant conclusions. But is this goal achieved at the end?

« 5 » Despite their meticulous reading of the four selected authors, the result is a somewhat forced analytical construction, which sets aside important details of each approach to give coherence to the proposed scheme. Consequently, the final product is not a unified scheme either but a patchwork of disparate concepts and themes.

« 6 » My claim is that instead of mispending theoretical efforts on revisiting out-dated oppositions or processing complex theoretical frameworks to make them fit into a certain model, a much better definition of constructivism could be achieved by deepening the very concept of “duality.” So, in this commentary, I will try to deepen the thesis of “duality” of Becerra and Castorina. However, I will appeal to the very basis of the argument and not to details of a particular concept or author. My goal is to test whether it is possible to sustain the argumentative strategy of the authors.